

# PRAIRIE PAGES

February 12, 2009



New Salem as it looks today. The village has been preserved and appears much as it did during Lincoln's day.

## Volume 8 Number 2

### Lincoln Bicentennial Issue: Lincoln's Years in Illinois 1830-1860

By Pete Harbison

#### GLOSSARY

**bankrupt**—a condition of financial ruin

**pilot**—person who steers the ship

**enterprise**—project or activity

#### WORK ON THE STEAMBOAT *TALISMAN*

Within a year of moving to New Salem, Abraham Lincoln's job ended when Denton Offutt's store went **bankrupt**. At about the same time, a Springfield businessman, Vincent A. Brogue, was trying to develop a steamboat service for the Sangamon River region. He had chartered a steamboat, the *Talisman*, to carry cargo on the Mississippi, Illinois, and Sangamon rivers. If steamboats could travel from the Illinois River up the Sangamon River near

Springfield, it would be a big transportation improvement.

Lincoln and others were hired to chop trees, cut overhanging branches, and generally clear the Sangamon River of obstructions between New Salem and Portland Landing (about a mile from Springfield). The steamboat was damaged during the struggle up the river. The water level on the Sangamon dropped quickly and the *Talisman* needed to move back downriver or it would be stranded near Springfield.

Lincoln signed on as assistant **pilot** for the return trip as far as Beardstown. The *Talisman* barely survived the trip downriver. Local businessmen lost money on this business **enterprise** and decided that steamboat travel was not practical on the Sangamon River. When the boat reached Beardstown, Lincoln received \$40 for his work and walked back to New Salem.

#### FIRST STEPS IN POLITICS

Lincoln's work on the steamboat project provided the basis for his first serious

## GLOSSARY

**Whig Party**—a political group

**promissory note**—a written promise to repay a borrowed sum of money; a type of loan from one person to another

**militia**—citizens called to serve as soldiers in an emergency

political campaign; he decided to run for the Illinois General Assembly in 1832 as a member of the **Whig Party**. The steamboat venture, even though it failed, had made Lincoln aware of the importance of good transportation. Lincoln promised to Sangamon County voters, that if elected, he would call for the state government to make improvements to the Sangamon River so it could be opened to steamboat traffic. Lincoln also wanted the government to support canal and railroad construction in Illinois. Lincoln knew how important transportation would be to the future of the state. Lincoln lost the election, finishing eighth out of thirteen candidates, but he had gained friends and respect in New Salem and Sangamon County.

## CAPTAIN IN THE MILITIA

In 1804, the Sauk and Fox tribes had signed treaties to give up their land in Illinois and move across the Mississippi River. Chief Black Hawk and others disputed the treaty because the people who had signed it did not have the authority to do so. Several times Black Hawk and his followers moved back to Illinois, but each time they were persuaded to leave peacefully. By 1832, the northern parts of Illinois were being settled by whites. The Sauks living close by made the settlers uneasy. In the spring of 1832, Black Hawk returned to Illinois with a band of about a thousand followers to an area near the Rock River. A force of Illinois **militia** was sent against the Sauk. Black Hawk sent a small group to negotiate a peaceful withdrawal from Illinois. The Illinois soldiers were frightened when the Sauk approached and fired on them, starting the Battle of Stillman's Run.

The governor of Illinois called for more volunteers to help fight in the Black Hawk War. A group of men from the New Salem area gathered to form a company. The men voted for young Abraham Lincoln to be their captain. The company of soldiers from New Salem never saw any action during the month that they were soldiers. Lincoln served an additional two months with another company. Lincoln later said the only thing he fought during his time in the militia was mosquitoes.

## BUSINESS OWNER

Using the \$125 he earned as a soldier, Lincoln teamed up with William Berry in January 1832 to buy a general store. This turned out to be a

bad investment, as the whole deal was based on **promissory notes**, and it left Lincoln deeply in debt. Working in the store had allowed Lincoln to continue meeting people and making friends among his neighbors, but it took 15 years for Lincoln to repay the money he lost in the business. He also had to pay back his partner's share of the debt because Berry died shortly after the business failed, with all his debts becoming Lincoln's responsibility.

## JACK OF ALL TRADES

Even though the Lincoln-Berry store failed, Lincoln learned lessons that helped him to be independent. He did not return to his father's farm when the store failed; he was determined to succeed on his own.

Lincoln hired himself out for a variety of jobs that showed his many skills. He used his considerable strength for splitting logs for rails, harvesting crops, and chopping firewood. He also used his intelligence, honesty, and friendliness whether clerking at the store, serving as an election judge, or writing for the *Sangamo Journal* newspaper. Lincoln continued to **board** with area families and to make a good impression on his neighbors.

## POSTMASTER

A bit of good luck came Lincoln's way in 1832 when he was appointed as a postmaster to New Salem. Mail was picked up and delivered to the village only once a week, and residents were responsible for picking up their mail at the post office. If postmaster Lincoln delivered to a home or business, it could cost up to an extra two cents a letter. Lincoln only made about \$20 a year for his service as postmaster, but this was a steady source of cash as well as another opportunity to further his education and meet people.

Serving as New Salem postmaster put Lincoln in contact with community members with whom he would joke, tell stories, and become a friend. This widening circle of friends would help him in his political career. Another benefit for the postmaster was that he could send letters free of charge. Lincoln also read the newspapers delivered to other people in the village before they came to pick them up. He served as New Salem postmaster for three years.



## GLOSSARY

*board, boarded*—to provide or to be provided with regular meals and lodging: a *boarder* is someone who pays or works for food and a place to stay

*surveyor*—a person who measures lengths and directions of boundary lines and records the measurements

## SURVEYOR

Lincoln's next government job was as the assistant to the Sangamon County **Surveyor**, John Calhoun. Calhoun and Lincoln were not from the same political party, but Calhoun offered him the job in 1833 because he was impressed with Lincoln's honesty and hard work.

Surveying property, new roads, and township boundaries required Lincoln to travel, so he borrowed money to buy a horse. While away from New Salem, Lincoln **boarded** with families all over central Illinois. Surveying was another step forward in his development. He was learning new skills and becoming a well-known and well-liked man throughout the county as well as meeting important businessmen from Springfield.

## POLITICIAN

In August 1834, Abraham Lincoln made a second try for election to the Illinois state legislature and succeeded. A friend of Lincoln's, William Butler, said that Lincoln won the election because he had been a captain in the militia, told good stories, remembered good jokes, and was friendly, kind, sympathetic, and open-hearted. Other community members said his speech-making skill and his large number of friends were the reasons for his victory.

Lincoln served the people of New Salem and the surrounding area at the state capital, which was then located at Vandalia. At the statehouse, Lincoln met individuals who

encouraged him to take the next step in his career. John Todd Stuart, Lincoln's roommate while serving in Vandalia, convinced him to take up the study of law. Lincoln borrowed textbooks and studied hard. He was not required to attend a school to study law, but it was much harder for him to learn the necessary material on his own. After two years, he had worked hard enough to qualify for a license to practice law.

Lincoln was reelected to the legislature in 1836, winning the most votes in Sangamon County. At the same time that Lincoln was serving in the state assembly, New Salem was declining. People moved away, as it became clear that the Sangamon River was not going to be developed for steamboat travel. New Salem became a ghost town. Sangamon County was divided into two separate counties, and a new county seat was formed in Petersburg for the new Menard County. Most New Salem residents hauled their whole cabins to Petersburg. The little village on a bluff above the Sangamon River was abandoned. In April 1837, Lincoln again borrowed a horse, packed all his belongings in saddlebags, and moved to the new capital city, Springfield.



Written by Peter C. Harbison, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency  
 Edited by Laura Reyman  
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